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ABSTRACT

Placement tests determine whether a student has mastered certain skills and content for a particular job or course of study and also help to identify students' weaknesses, which can then be targeted for improvement. Placement test objectives should be clearly defined, and design and administration are also crucial. If students are misclassified, the consequences can be severe, including lowered academic achievement. Cut-off points should be used with care. Chulalongkorn University (Thailand) Language Institute offers a basic English course to all first-year students. Because competent students appeared to be wasting their time in this course, the university instituted a placement/exemption test to exempt students meeting established criteria and to group remaining students according to their abilities. About 400 students have been exempted each year. The test has proved a reliable tool for assessment; however, it lacks both an aural and an oral component and therefore is not a completely accurate measure of communicative ability. In addition, some exempted students fail to improve their overall communication skills because their language study was interrupted at the beginning of university study. Despite these drawbacks, the test has eliminated waste and has helped diagnose weaknesses among incoming students. (MSE)

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THE PLACEMENT TEST: A USEFUL OR HARMFUL TOOL

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The Role of the Placement Test in English Language Teaching

According to Rebecca M. Valette in Modern Language Testing (1977), the primary objective of a proficiency test is to determine whether or not the student has mastered certain specific skills and content that are deemed to be prerequisites for a particular job or course of study. Of all various types of proficiency tests, the placement test is perhaps the most widely used. Tests of this nature are widely utilized at college and university level, where the necessity arises to assign large groups of incoming students to language classes of varying levels of difficulty -- from intermediate through upper-intermediate to advanced.

The placement test serves an additional purpose, which is of great benefit to both the educational institution and the student in that it helps from the outset to determine the students' needs, and thus provides a greater degree of flexibility in catering to those needs. This eliminates educational redundancy.

In addition, the placement test can be used as a diagnostic test, whereby weaknesses in student performance are identified and subsequently remedied, thus ensuring maximum achievement of student objectives. Consequently, a well-designed placement test enables instructors to better assess the needs of the students and implement the appropriate methodology and teaching materials with greater effectiveness and, if necessary, revise materials or make use of supplements.

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Important Issues for Consideration during the Planning Stage

Since objectives will be different from institution to institution, to ensure maximum effectiveness the placement test should be constructed by the school or college itself. The requisite level of preparation should be determined for each course and the test itself should be especially designed to measure the degree of knowledge, as well as the specific skills, required for success. Commercially prepared tests may also be used, although these may prove to be problematic and far less satisfactory; as great care must then be taken to fairly interprete the scores in light of the school's course requirements. On the whole, it would seem that a placement test tailor-made by a particular educational institution, with specific parameters to meet objectives, -- is more desirable.

A good example of the latter type is provided by Graham Low of the University of York who has developed a placement test specially designed for students about to enter a post-graduate course of study. In his paper on this subject published in Language Testing Update (1986), he describes the primary function of his particular test as one of placing students into groups or 'streams' for an intensive language course they are about to undertake. Another example of an appropriate placement test designed by a particular educational institution, is that used at the Language Institute at DTEC -- the Department of Technical and Economic Corporation, located in Bangkok. Its primary goal is to determine if a candidate is sufficiently skilled in English, either to meet the linguistic demands of a course of training abroad or to fulfill certain on-the-job requirements at his/her particular place of employment in

Thailand. This test is also used as a placement test for DTEC's own students, as well as an end-of-course achievement test.

Two other major factors fundamental to the success of any placement test are design and administration. In designing or writing a test, it is essential that the writer have an expert knowledge of the domains and issues relating to language assessment, particularly an understanding of the relationship of differing linguistic dimensions of proficiency to overall competency.

Clearly, great care must be taken in terms of content. To quote Finocchiaro and Sako in their book, Foreign Langauge Testing: A Practical Approach (1983), "The content will or should reflect the purpose for which the test has been prepared." That is, in order to place a student at the appropriate level, accurate assessment is essential. The consequences of misclassification due to an inadequate or inappropriate test may include improper placement, insufficient instructors and, as a result, a lower standard of academic achievement. An example of a cause of misclassification is the predetermined cut-off point in a test. The inherent danger in the use of cut-off points is that they are rarely accurate and easily lead to a misinterpretation of the test results.

In terms of administration, according to Terry Phillips in Language Testing Update (1987), "Successful placement depends as much, if not more, on skilled administrators than on the testing instrument itself." As we have already observed, the testing instrument itself must be easy to administer to the examinees -- a crucial factor especially when the test is to be used as a screening or placement instrument for a large number of students. Simply put,

the efficiency, or the lack of it, of the test greatly depends on administrability, which depends, in turn, on a number of factors. For example, the directions must be presented in simple, uncomplicated and unequivocal language that all examinees can understand.

Administrative constraints can have a major impact on testing efficiency. This is especially true as these constraints may also affect the content of the test itself, as well as 'scorability' as defined by Finocchiaro and Sako (1983). For example, lack of sufficient staff may make it difficult to include an extensive cloze section in the test. Given the number of choices and the element of subjectivity involved, such a complex test may be difficult for an understaffed institution to grade. Thus the quality of the assessment directly depends on the time and the human resources an institution can commit to the task of grading and double-checking. The importance of these factors is verified by the evidence that when students are placed successfully, the course tends to function more smoothly and there is, consequently, a lower rate of failure.

Implementation of the Placement Test at Chulalongkorn University

One of the services provided by Chulalongkorn University Language Institute is to offer the Foundation English Course to all first-year students. Unfortunately, the results of the course have been less than satisfactory from both the teachers' and the students' points of view. The primary cause is that the course has been found to cover too broad a spectrum of subject content, as well as too diverse a range of language skills, and these have been found not to correlate closely enough with the variety of students' English language backgrounds.

It was observed, for example, that in spite of studying English for 8 years before entering the university, a certain percentage of the student body could bearly read or write. On the other hand, many of the students had attended one of the many prestigious Catholic schools in Bangkok where English is used as a medium of instruction for most subjects and some had even spent some time abroad in an English-speaking country as part of a high-school student exchange programme.

For the weaker students, the first-year English course seems to represent a Herculean task to which they have to devote an enormous amount of time in their studies, while for the relatively competent, the course means a duplication of effort and a misuse of precious study time which they could devote to their subject area of interest.

Given this situation, CULI decided in 1985 policy to introduce a Placement/Exemption Test designed to be administered to all the incoming students from the 15 faculties throughout the University. The aim was to exempt students who satisfied the criteria needed to pass the first required course -- Foundation English I (FE I), and at the same time, to subsequently group the rest of the students in their respective faculties according to their individual ability.

A study was conducted after the first two years of implementation to determine the efficiency of the test. The following findings were indicated:

1. Approximately 350 to 400 students each year met the requirements for exemption from the FE I course. Some of these were then able to take other courses in their specific faculties, whether

compulsory or elective, while the rest could choose to progress at their own pace in their course of study. In the first year, we were able to place students from 7 faculties as opposed to the 15 intended, and in the second year, we extended the service to 10 faculties.

2. For both Science and Non-Science students, a statistically significant correlation existed among the following:

a. a correlation coefficient of .7901 and .7873 between the University Entrance Examination and the Placement/Exemption Test,

b. a correlation coefficient of .7508 between the Placement/Exemption Test and the Foundation English Achievement Test, and

c. a correlation coefficient of .7719 and .7470 between the University Entrance Examination and the Foundation English Achievement Test.

As can be seen from these correlations, success on the Foundation English Achievement Test as well as on the Placement/Exemption Test, can be determined with more than a fair amount of precision by the University Entrance Examination.

3. Using, as a base, the mean score of the University Entrance Examination for Science students, the students from the Faculty of Medicine ranked first whereas the students from the Faculty of Fine Arts ranked last. However, using the University Entrance Examination for Non-Science students as a base, the students from the Faculty of Arts ranked first while the students from the Faculty of Fine Arts again ranked last.

Of all the students who were exempted from the FE I course and then later enrolled in the FE II course, the Faculty of Medicine ranked first in terms of exemption with 31.37% of the students taking the Placement/Exemption Test being exempted. Faculty of Arts students achieved the second highest exemption rate with 24.34%, whereas the Faculty of Education students ranked last in that a mere .76% of these students received exemptions. It should also be noted that students from both the Faculties of Medicine and Arts received top scores in their FE I course.

A Discussion of CULI Placement/Exemption Test

It can be clearly seen that the Placement/Exemption Test as instituted by CULI serves two purposes, both as a proficiency test and as an achievement test. It is designed to fit our own learning situation in Thailand. Since a great number of students need to be screened at one time, the test has to be easy to administer and quick to mark.

There are, of course, a number of drawbacks to the present system. For one thing, our placement test lacks both an oral and aural component and thus contains an imbalance between receptive and productive skills; hence, it is not a totally accurate measure of communicative ability. Nevertheless, it must be pointed out that an oral component would be physically and logistically impossible to measure given the limited resources of the Institute and the numbers of students involved. Besides, simply because a student does well on the written, does not necessarily mean that he is sufficiently skilled in terms of oral and aural abilities. In fact, the performance of

some of these students when they take the FE II course has proved rather disappointing in some respects. It could be argued that such a student would benefit from first semester exposure to a native speaker or to a highly-trained Thai instructor with near native fluency and that it would encourage improvements in terms of pronunciation, intonation and overall communication skills.

Therefore, at present, the issue is whether or not the exemption should be disbanded. One could argue that it is undesirable to interrupt a student's course of study so abruptly, especially right at the beginning of his university study, and that this might have negative effects on his linguistic development. Another argument is that, it is physically and logistically impossible for an institute the size of CULI to offer separate courses for students of varying abilities to accommodate their needs according to their performance on the Placement/Exemption Test: this was the original plan intended by CULI's initiating the policy regarding the Placement/Exemption Test.

On the one hand, we realize that all tests are flawed to a certain extent; otherwise we would be able to claim that we had discovered the perfect testing instrument. As Randall L. Jones of Brigham Young University stated in his paper, Performance Testing of Second Language Proficiency (1979) - "No test could be considered universally valid, regardless of how well it might perform for a given task". On the other hand, however, the content of the placement test should directly reflect the parameters of the English programme concerned.

It is on this basis that we believe the CULI Placement/Exemption Test provides a relatively reliable tool of assessment and that its essential goals are relatively clear-cut.

Although the screening of a large number of students is involved, it has not been necessary to develop a highly refined placement battery. By and large the test works in that it does reflect the parameters of the English programme concerned, namely the course, Foundation English I. It serves its purpose in that it exempts those students whose English-language skills are already sufficiently developed to meet the requirements of Foundation English II, and in that it therefore leaves these students free to pursue studies within their chosen field. Those who are exempted, of course, are phased into the course at the beginning of the second semester, ie. Foundation English II (FE II). The exemption of the competent students leaves the teachers free to concentrate on the language problems confronting those students who must master FE I prior to entering FE II.

In conclusion, we have found that the advantages of our placement test greatly outweigh the disadvantages. The test has eliminated the misuse of study time on the part of the student, and it has improved the overall efficiency of English langauge instruction at CULI. In addition, the CULI Placement/Exemption Test has proved a useful diagnostic tool in helping to pinpoint areas of weakness among incoming students and has thus been beneficial in shaping and improving the curriculum. On the whole, our experience has been that the CULI Placement/Exemption Test is a valuable educational instrument.

According to a survey conducted among those exempted from the FE I course, 89% were found to be in favour of the CULI Placement/ Exemption Test. The actual format is still open to experimentation, perhaps even to the point of using the English component of the University Entrance Examination as a placement indicator: note the correlation coefficient between the University Entrance Examination and the CULI Placement/Exemption Test discussed on page 6 of this paper. In addition, CULI's plans for the near future include opening a Resource Centre for the use of students who are exempted from taking

the FE I course,as well as for the use of those students whose level of English is unusually low. The Centre will be equipped with materials for all levels. including textbooks, newspapers, audio and video educational equipment, and various other educational aids. And, most importantly, the Centre will have a staff of floating instructors to assist students in their independent study of the English Language.

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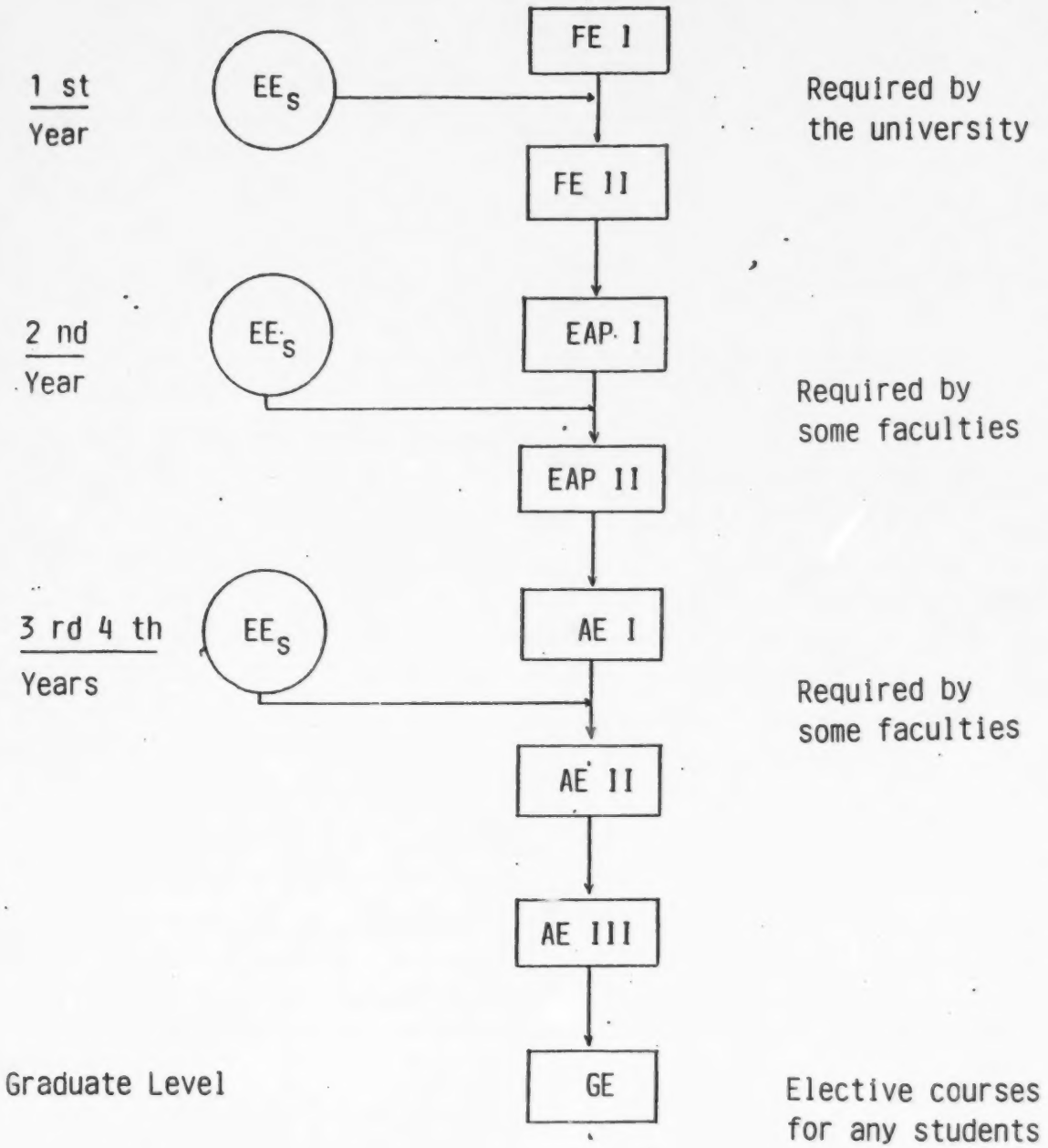
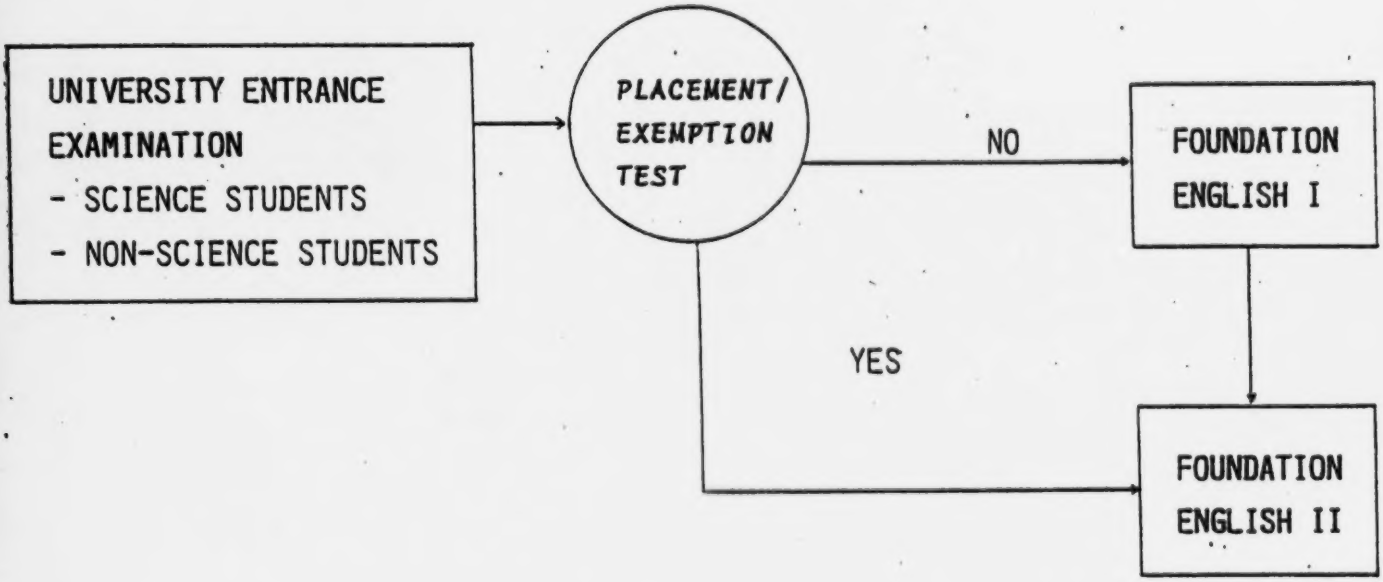
CULI COURSES

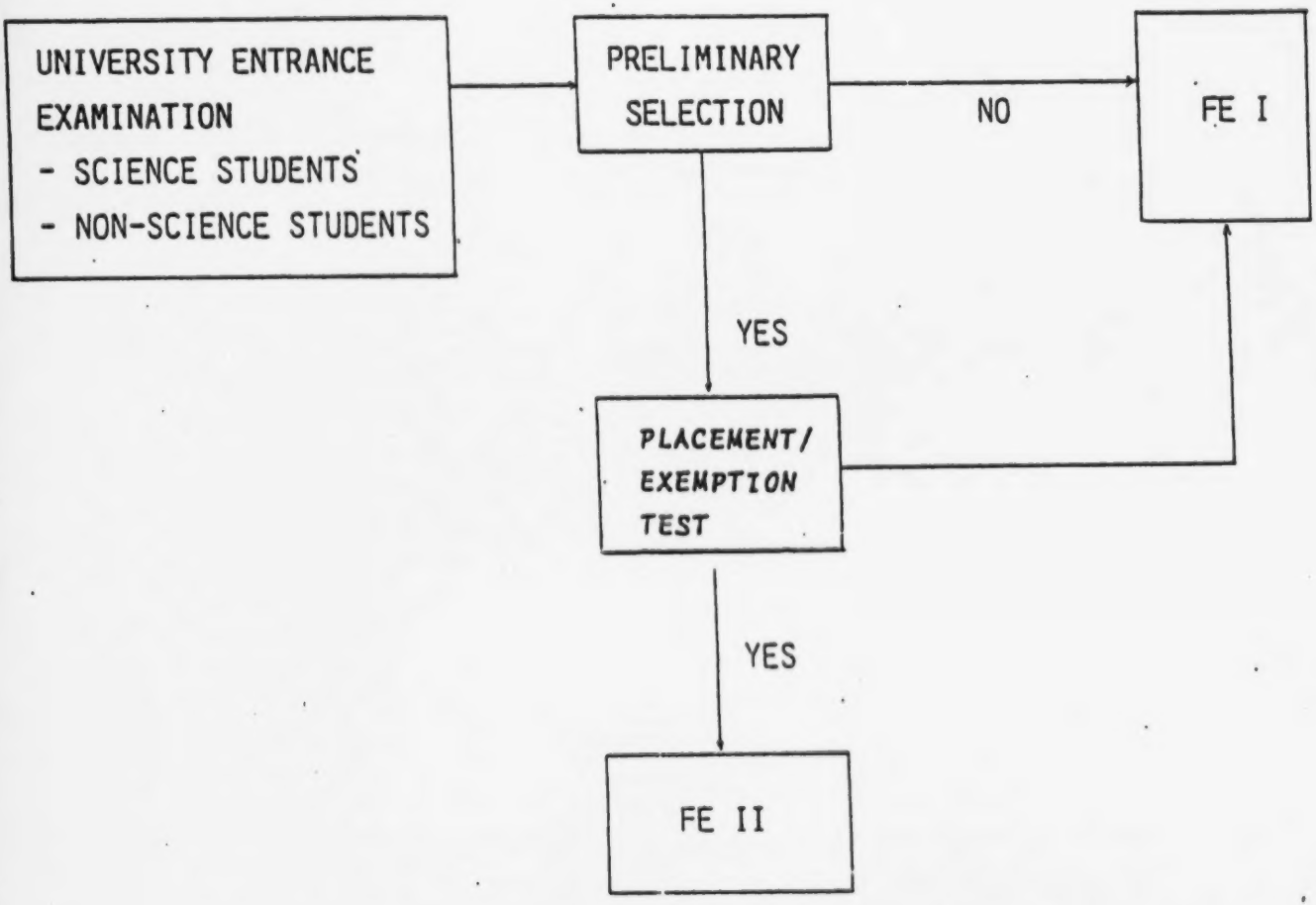


Note: FE = Foundation English
EAP = English for Academic Purposes
AE = Advanced English
GE = Graduate English
EE = Elective English

1985


UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMINATION
- SCIENCE STUDENTS
- NON-SCIENCE STUDENTS
PLACEMENT/ EXEMPTION TEST
NO
FOUNDATION ENGLISH I
YES
FOUNDATION ENGLISH II

1986-1988


UNIVERSITY ENTRANCE EXAMINATION
- SCIENCE STUDENTS
- NON-SCIENCE STUDENTS
PRELIMINARY SELECTION
NO
FE I
YES
PLACEMENT/ EXEMPTION TEST
YES
FE II

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